

Environmentalists push for safe cleanup at nuclear site near Buffalo

By Jay Silver



Photo: Will Waldron, Albany Times Union

Activists in the West Valley Action Network, an organization supporting the complete cleanup of a nuclear site near Buffalo, recently sent a letter to state Assembly Majority Leader Crystal Peoples-Stokes, D-Buffalo, raising concerns about the site. (Will Waldron/Times Union)

WASHINGTON — Environmental advocacy groups in western New York want state officials to ensure the safety of federal plans to deal with nuclear waste at the **West Valley Demonstration Project** after a recent federal report found that “critical decisions regarding the project are still unresolved.”

The **West Valley Demonstration Project** “should never have been chosen” to store hazardous material, said Barbara Warren, a member of the Citizens’ Environmental Coalition, an Albany-based group that advocates for safe and healthy communities in New York.

The project, about 40 miles from Buffalo, evolved from the **Western New York Nuclear Service Center**, which was built in the 1960s to convert “spent nuclear fuel from commercial reactors into reusable nuclear material,” according to a Jan. 13 U.S. Government Accountability Office report. In 1976, production of the materials ceased, leaving hundreds of gallons of radioactive material behind.

The **West Valley Demonstration Project** was created after Congress required the Energy Department to be “responsible for solidifying the high-level waste, disposing of waste created by the solidification, and decommissioning the facilities used in the process.”

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The GAO’s congressionally mandated review of the Energy Department’s progress in finding a way to decommission the facility and move or destroy the radioactive waste found that the agency has made progress in the cleanup of the facility, including the decommissioning of 51 out of 55 storage containers as well as the proper disposal of 1.3 million cubic feet of low-level waste. The eventual goal is to demolish the above-ground structures, remove contaminated soil and and relocate the solidified high-level waste.

However, according to the report, “critical decisions regarding the cleanup are still unresolved, such as where the remaining waste is to go and what waste, if any, is to remain on-site.”

In addition, the GAO determined that the “DOE reported spending about \$3.1 billion on contracted cleanup activities, but it cannot estimate the cleanup’s final cost until it decides how it will address the remaining waste.”

According to Allison Bawdin, a director in the GAO’s Natural Resources and Environment team, there is no place in New York that can easily dispose of the waste created from the plant, causing further conflict between state officials and the DOE.

“Essentially, what we’re presenting is the impasse and the fact that until that impasse is resolved, this waste isn’t going anywhere,” Bawdin said.

Lynda Schneekloth, a member of the Sierra Club Niagara Group – an organization that advocates for environmental protection in western New York, said the Trump administration proposed creating a temporary waste storage facility, which she called a “terrible” idea. And she said no one has come up with a solution to getting rid of the waste.

“Congress doesn’t really know what to do. Experts don’t really know what to do with nuclear rights,” she said. “It’s a worldwide problem.”

Schneekloth and Warren, along with other activists in the West Valley Action Network, an organization supporting the complete cleanup of the project, sent a letter to state Assembly Majority Leader Crystal Peoples-Stokes, D-Buffalo, prior to the release of the GAO Report addressing similar concerns.

“In the end, New York state is the owner of this land and will be left with any long lasting contamination,” the letter states. “We are asking your office to request a review of the planned demolition and call for enclosure and monitoring by NYS agencies to ensure that the health of the people and the environment is protected.”

Bawdin said that the GAO’s recommendation is that Congress come up with a plan on how to properly dispose of the waste and categorize it into defense waste or other waste.

“The high-level waste at West Valley is kind of caught up in that larger national problem about which we have made recommendations in our prior reports ... the sticking point that still exists with respect to resolving the unknowns about the path forward to address the remaining cleanup activities,” she said.

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